The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

MUSIC

Singer Ethel Cain's rise and tragic fall, as divined by her creator

Hayden Anhedönia's alter ego performs May 19 at the Anthem

By Olivia McCormack

May 17, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

Hayden Anhedönia is sitting comfortably in her Pittsburgh home. Meanwhile, Ethel Cain, the musical persona Anhedönia created, is rotting in her lover's stomach, having fallen victim to a case of domestic cannibalism that Cain recounts on her debut studio album, "Preacher's Daughter."

That album spells the end for Ethel Cain. But don't worry; Anhedönia has a trio of prequel albums in the works, one focusing on her alter ego's high school years and two more that will relay the stories of Cain's mother and grandmother. Oh, and Cain is currently touring, which is something the deceased can do when they were never quite real to begin with — when they were born from a mind like Anhedönia's.

A storyteller at heart, Anhedönia has been living in her head for as long as she can remember. As a child, she would concoct stories to keep herself entertained. The desire to create new worlds never went away: "I've always been obsessed with having one foot out of reality," she said in a recent Zoom interview.

That reality-straddling is what conjured Ethel Cain, who shares some similarities with her creator — they both came from deeply religious families in the South — but also some major differences. Anhedönia left her hometown and became a successful singer whose breakout hit was listed as one of former president Barack Obama's favorite songs of the year. Ethel Cain was consumed by love, turned to sex work and then got cannibalized by her lover — a horror story worthy of the Old Testament.

"I want to tell this great American epic. A story that is rooted in both realism and surrealism and is just entertaining, but also has some emotional depth to it," said Anhedönia.

As a kid, Anhedönia dreamed up stories to keep herself entertained. As an adult, she's devising stories to stay connected to her childhood. Anhedönia, a trans woman, grew up in a religious family in Perry, Fla. After high school, she had a bad taste in her mouth and wanted to flee. Circumstances made that dream impossible, so she moved about an hour away to Tallahassee. There, her affinity for her home was rekindled.

“I came to love the places I grew up,” said Anhedönia. “But kind of in a different context because I was an adult, so I was a bit more in control of my environment.”

“Preacher’s Daughter,” which was released in May 2022, is a twisted love letter to the South. Anhedönia used Ethel Cain for a reckoning of sorts. Her alter ego “became this kind of figurehead for everything that I’d loved growing up and kind of started to reclaim as an adult.”

Her gothic love letter is not without internal friction. Anhedönia, now a Pittsburgh resident, struggles with the coastal propensity to write off Southerners, while also watching with horror as her home state passes a slate of anti-trans legislation.

“Every time you see [anti-trans legislation], you’re transported back to when you were a kid,” she said. “You’re like, ‘Oh, my God.’ Just because you made it out doesn’t mean everybody’s made it out. It’s an ongoing thing for these kids.”

Anhedönia feels that whatever measure of acceptance she gained back home came because people knew her personally — she was someone they’d broken bread with, not a boogeyman caricature sketched out by some fearmongering campaign.

And she hopes, inversely, that she can be that bridge to people better understanding the complexity of the South.

“I would really hope that through making art the way that I do, people could see that you can be from the South, you can be from a rural area, you can be all these things and also be trans,” said Anhedönia. “It is such a diverse community, and there’s a lot of love there, and there’s a lot of camaraderie and community and familial ties underneath all that kind of hatred that the South is known for.”

Anhedönia, 25, grew up in the early aughts, wearing a cousin’s hand-me-downs, watching VHS tapes and attending Southern Baptist church with her family four or five days a week.

“This first record was me trying to capture that nostalgia of my childhood and what it felt like to be a kid in the middle of a lot of crazy [stuff] that I didn’t understand,” said Anhedönia. Part of what she didn’t understand was why the church seemed to both love and reject her. In her song “Sun Bleached Flies,” she chants, “What I wouldn’t give to be in church this Sunday / Listening to the choir so heartfelt, all singing / ‘God loves you, but not enough to save you.’”

Similar sentiments of God’s unanswered prayers are echoed in “American Teenager,” an antiwar single that Obama included on his list of favorite songs of 2022. Asked about the significance of that recognition, Anhedönia said she had “zero thoughts.” Instead, she’s struck by how quickly her life has changed.

In 2019, she was working on “Preacher’s Daughter” on the heels of announcing her transformation into Ethel Cain and taking photos in abandoned houses where she would have to fling fleas off an ethereal white dress. Now, she’s “Mother Cain,” as her fan base calls her.

Anhedönia feels just fine about that kind of recognition.

Especially “if it makes these kids feel connected. And part of something,” she said. “Growing up, we didn’t have somebody from the South being like, ‘Hey, you can do all this [stuff] and you can still pump your gas barefoot.’ It’s cool to be that.”

8 p.m. May 19 at the Anthem, 901 Wharf St. SW. theanthemdc.com. $55.